

CHRISTMAS COLUMN

A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

From London Society.

They are ringing, they are ringing,
Our merry Christmas bells,
In the village, in the city,
In the dale-church, o'er the fells.

Andrew Walter's Christmas Eve.

BY ROBERT HUDSON.

CHAPTER I.

The whole town said, with scarcely a dissenting voice, that Andrew Walter's misfortune, and this last misfortune in particular, was a judgment upon him.

One might have been disposed to call the town a village had it not from time immemorial returned a member of Parliament.

We are not sure that the East Wykehamites are yet agreed as to which of their own sins it is that has called down the judgment which has fallen upon them in the loss of their member by the new Reform bill.

Should the reader be disposed to ask further, what manner of place is East Wykeham? we are sorry we cannot say it is pretty well, or pretty lively, or pretty clean, or indeed pretty anything, unless we say it is pretty nearly the embodiment of dullness and stupidity.

As for society, there are the usual two doctors, two lawyers (one of whom was never known to have a client), the vicar, two or three dissenting preachers, two grocers, two drapers, two tailors, and the rest; in all numbering a population, according to the last census, of we really cannot say precisely how few.

At any rate they have never been too few for the development among themselves of every known variety of evil speaking and uncharitableness; nor were they, as we began by saying, too many to agree in the case of Andrew Walter that his misfortunes were a judgment upon him, and that to sympathize with him would be little short of impious.

It was an established axiom at East Wykeham that going to sea was about equivalent to going to penal servitude. And though a bunch of magistrates may be found here and there to give a man three weeks' hard labor for picking up an apple, no one gets penal servitude if he has done absolutely nothing to deserve it.

Now his son James had sailed from England not for Calcutta but Hong Kong, and it was clear he must have encountered such terrible weather as had first driven him far out of his course, and, at the last, compelled him to run for the Hooghly.

It, and had no taste for farming. But East Wykeham knew better than to set any value on such an excuse as this. A lad living in an inland county clearly had no right to have a taste for the sea.

Neither were the townsfolk pitiful as regarded that matter of the bond. He had much better have never learned to write at all than show such fatal facility in writing his name.

'And so,' concluded Mr. Botley, the grocer, to Mr. Skinner, the draper (each of whom had a bill of a few shillings against poor Andrew Walter)—'and so it is one makes bad debts, and loses one's money by other folks' fault, as doesn't care to work so hard for it.'

CHAPTER II.

IN TIME OF TROUBLE.

Andrew Walter's house pleasantly overlooked the town, both house and inmates being happily lifted above their neighbors' spite and unkindness.

It, as the winter day closed in, the reader could have walked up the well-kept gravelled path, defended by choice shrubs, and could have stood at the bright window, whose panes flashed beneath the sunlight, this is what he would have seen inside as sung a room as he could wish to look upon.

First, a man somewhat past the middle age, well knit and sinewy, with a face kindly and pleasant, though not without lines of care, and at present full of perplexity.

Next, a girl of about eighteen, but looking older and as if a premature responsibility had sobered her merry face. She sits at a table which is covered with evergreens, and is busy stitching irvy leaves on strips of cardboard which in a little while will be shaped into letters.

Next, another girl, some four years younger, wonderfully like her sister, but more like her father. She, too, is busy constructing, with wire and string to help, a long rope or ropes of leafy green.

Last, the Mite, as Andrew often calls her, sadly, 'the wower's mite.' She is a wee maid of only six years old, but persuades herself she, too, is usefully busy, with needle and thread, making a necklace of the scarlet holly-berries. Her name is Lucy.

The girls, it is to be noticed, are all in black, seemingly of the newest and deapest; and there seems to be but little speaking amongst them.

One could not look upon the man without feeling that he was a man of strong passions and affections; nor on the girls without feeling they were all in all to each other and to him.

Until within the last year the current of his life had flowed smoothly and prosperously. He had had but one great sorrow, the loss of his wife; and that sorrow having befallen him when his little maid was born, had been softened by time, though not (and not to be forgotten. Now, however, he was indeed in troubled waters.

The one loss to which he could not bring himself to be submissive (being loss of that which no strength of arm or activity of brain could ever bring him back again) was the loss of his boy. 'The sea, indeed, shall give up its dead,' he said to himself, 'but not to me.'

He took from his pocket-book and read once more the account, cut out from a Calcutta newspaper, of the great catastrophe in the Hooghly which had bereaved him. It gave, as far as was known, the names of all vessels lost, with the port to which they belonged, the captain's name, and a brief description of the nature of the damage in each case.

Table with 5 columns: Name of Ship, Of what Port, Name of Captain, Remarks, and Remarks. Row 1: All is Well, Not known, Not known, Supposed to be on the coast, O row and all lost.

clear he must have encountered such terrible weather as had first driven him far out of his course, and, at the last, compelled him to run for the Hooghly.

In addition to the particulars got from the newspapers, he had obtained, through the consular agency, this further information:—The evidence on which the name of the captain had been published as 'supposed J. E. Walter' was that, entangled amongst the wreck of the 'All is Well' had been found a portion of a captain's coat, in the breast-pocket of which had been found several papers, all of which were quite illegible except one empty envelope, the address of which had been deciphered as 'Captain J. E. Walter, the 'All is Well,' Cape Town.'

Restoring the piece of newspaper and the envelope to his pocket-book, he lit a candle, left the girls at their work, and went into an adjoining room. Leaping against the wall was a package wrapped in matting, small, but somewhat heavy. The contents, when unwrapped and placed upon the table, proved to be a plain, white marble slab, bearing this inscription:—

'In remembrance of JAMES EDWARD WALTER (only son of Andrew Walter of this place), who was drowned in the River Hooghly, Bengal, during the great hurricane of 1867. Aged 22 years. Rev. xxi. 1.'

He had chosen to append this reference to a text of Scripture, rather than the text itself. Those who cared to turn up the passage in their Bibles, as they sat in church, would see that the comfort he found in it was in keeping before him the thought that though hereafter there should be a new heaven, and a new earth, there should be 'no more sea.'

The father called the girls in for a minute to look at the slab, and they read the inscription silently and tearfully. Then he covered it up again, and they went back.

The stone had been worked elsewhere and sent home to him that he might himself (as he had wished) superintend its erection over his own poor Tom. Thus, he and his daughters had each a duty in church-to-morrow—his, to go early with the mason and put up this stone; theirs, to go later and help the vicar's wife to affix the Christmas decorations; for the morrow was the eve of Christmas Day.

'I remember,' said Andrew, 'teaching him all about India, and the Ganges, and this very Hooghly itself, years and years ago; little thinking—ah! little thinking.'

'The girls only shook their heads gently and sighed.'

'I don't doubt and fear it was my teaching him so much geography that filled him full of longing to see the world, and the ways of strange people, and first made him impatient of this dull place.'

'Impatient of it, but never of us, papa. Let us be thankful for that,' said Maggie.

'Tired of us? No, indeed,' said the father with proud affection. 'I have known some sad days, for I don't doubt there are more in store for all of us; but the saddest day of all would be that on which I should think my children were tired of their father or each other.'

A little hand had stolen into his as he spoke and a little mouth had been upturned to kiss him, while two other faces had turned to him with looks more eloquent than words.

He took the young child upon his knee, and wound her curls about his rough, strong fingers, as he spoke again. 'And I won't say that he was wrong to choose the sea. Could any lad have done better at it than he has done? Would not his masters have made him captain at twenty-one of their own vessel if I had not bought him a ship myself, and freighted it?'

'And he never once,' said Edith, 'spent a holiday anywhere but here.'

'I wonder if it was the name that did it,' pondered Andrew, who was not without his superstitions. 'I wonder if I tempted Providence when I would call the ship no other name than "All is Well"?''

'The ships that went down in the storm that day had names of all kinds,' said Maggie, 'and one name had as little protection in it as another.'

There, as the outer darkness deepened, they sat by the fire and talked. The little one on Andrew's knee.

It seemed a transition almost from night to day when they passed from talk of the lost boy to talk of the mere loss of money, so much had the greater trouble exceeded the less. But it was not till Maggie had peeped over her father's arm into the small face and said 'she's asleep,' that they spoke quite freely of their pecuniary difficulties.

The solicitor through whom all Andrew's money transactions had hitherto been arranged was an old schoolfellow of his, whose probity and kindness of heart he had long known. His position was rather that of an intimate and affectionate family friend than a legal adviser.

For indeed it depended on this letter whether they should stay in their old home,

or go out at once into the world and seek another.

'The new Maggie,' he said, 'as this may be the last Christmas we shall have here, we must not keep it quite like a common day, even though we cannot keep it as we used to do. Put on your bonnet and go into the town with me. Poor little Mite, how soundly she sleeps; see, she has not waked by my putting her on Edie's knee.'

As the door closed gently on them, however, up sprang little Loo and drew aside the curtain, peeping after them, and laughing.

'I've never been asleep a minute, Edie,' she said, 'only pretending.'

Whereupon Edie having first assumed what she supposed would be the appropriate manner of a lady of about fourteen, talked down to the young deceiver from that great elevation, in an impressive way, and having rung for Martha, inexorably told that maid to take her off to bed.

Then she herself set to work again with busy fingers amongst her holly leaves, her ivy and laurel, until she had got length enough, as she thought, of bright green rope. After which she gave the finishing touches to Maggie's letters, and fixing a white table cover against the piano, pinned them on it,—the sacred monogram.

They had made the little purchases for the Christmas Day, buying on a humble scale than usual, and, as Maggie told her, had sent to the widow's house at the mill exactly the same as they had bought for themselves, for Andrew's dainties would have had no relish had he thought those who were so near to him, and had been so dear to his dead brother, did not share in them.

CHAPTER III.

'ALL IS WELL.'

Next morning Lucy was up early, and the reason being one of those mild and open ones which have of late taken the place of the severer Christmases of our fathers, she ran out and amused herself, as children like to do, by digging.

The place she chose for digging was just inside the garden gate, where she was accustomed to wait on fine mornings to get the letters from the post-office.

The garden gate was not quite visible from any of the windows of the house, the path being curved; but Edie running out betimes (for they were all early risers) found the child busy there. She had excavated a very neat little grave, and was just giving the finishing touches to her work.

'Who are you going to bury to-day, Loo?' she asked.

'Oh, I know,' said the child, 'you go along. It's not you; it's a wicked man you.'

'I see the postman coming round the corner,' said Edie, 'run in as soon as you get the letters; and I shall let her see.'

In another minute the child had the letters from the postman—some four or five; and in an instant (as soon as his back was turned) had selected the wicked one (the London letter with the prim little seal, which she had so often whipped in vain), had pitched it into the little grave, and, having filled in the earth, and made all smooth above it, then ran into the house with the rest of the letters, out of breath.

'Nothing again,' said Andrew, as he turned them over. 'But I don't know as it is good news this time. Franklin would have written, I am sure, if he had had anything to write which would do us good. Sure you have not dropped any letters, Loo?' But when he looked round he found the child had slipped out of the room, and nothing more was said when she returned.

'I see the girl indeed made any mention of the letter which had been expected, or of the subject to which it should have referred; but that subject weighed not the less heavily on all of them.'

To each of them it was clear now that in this matter of the mortgage nothing could be done, that the money must be paid, and that to pay it there must be a sale, and they must leave the dear old house. As they passed from room to room that morning, or from walk to walk in the garden, a feeling grew upon them all that they were taking farewell looks of all. And as the girls decorated the pictures and mirrors with the Christmas holly, they thought sadly that when Christmas came again other hands would cut the shrubs and trim the rooms for other people.

Happily those duties which lay nearest to each of them were sufficient in great measure to distract their minds from dwelling too much upon the future. Let come what would to-morrow, to-day had its own work waiting for each of them.

While the girls were busied therefore about their household morning work, doubly diligent that they might hurry to the church, Andrew Walter went with the mason and saw the memorial he had provided for his son erected over his own grave.

This did not occupy him long, and he was soon at home again, walking briskly in his fields, perhaps hoping to find in weariness of limb some rest for over-anxiety of spirit.

As for the fine old arch, when the bright sunlight poured in through the many-colored window panes, and fell on the sweet patient faces of these girls as they wreathed the pulpit, the communion rails, and the grand columns of the nave—as they decked the holy table itself with living green and scarlet, and expended all their loving ingenuity and taste in the decoration of the quaint old rood screen—it was by no means a place of gloom.

Even the time-stained monuments upon the walls—the ancient knight and lady still uplifting stony hands in silent prayer—the grotesque faces of the corbels all seemed to wear a brighter, tenderer aspect under the influence of the Christmas green. The old dead stone and the young animated faces seemed alike touched with a new and deeper expression under the influence of the gracious season and the work that in itself was surely a sort of worship.

As column after column was finished, and arch after arch showed its rich free outline in bright green; as one after the other the branching candelabra grew into graceful bushes of leaf and fruit, the sun sank down and the shadows crept out. Then when all was finished, and the old sexton with one solitary candle was sweeping up the scattered fragments from the floor, the vicar's wife and the rest of those

who had been at work shook hands and parted.

When all the rest had gone, however, Maggie and her sisters stayed behind. And with them stayed their cousin Minnie, from the mill, a girl of about Maggie's own age, who mourned for the lost sailor lad with a bitterness that was intensified by thinking that she had let him go when last they parted with her love still unconfessed.

The girls sat for a while all silent in the family pew. Maggie held little Lucy in her arms, and Edith rested with her head on Minnie's knee. The moon rose and poured its light with a glory of crimson and gold fall on them and on the new marble slab, beneath which Maggie sat with her face buried on the young child's shoulder.

It was Minnie who was organist at the church, and being there she must needs play over one of the anthems of the morrow. Edith went with her to blow the bellows. For a while Maggie continued to sit with bowed head, still weeping, but soothed and calmed by the strains.

The hymn was 'Hark, the herald angels sing;' and as the player forgot her sorrow more and more in the exultation of the music as the notes swelled more and more, volubly filling the church with grand old melody, the little voice of Lucy rose in Maggie's ear singing the well-known words, and Maggie herself unconsciously joined in them and lifted up her head.

There in front of her, clearly defined by the moon, stood her brother—the dead brother who had been lost at sea. Maggie neither screamed nor fainted. He had been so entirely present in her mind—she had as yet been so wholly unable to think of him as anything but the bright, cheerful brother of all her life—that to see him there seemed at first only natural. Then in a moment, however, the recollection of all that had befallen in the last mournful months flashed up. No fear came with the recollection; only an intense surprise.

Why should she fear, if even this were the spirit of her much-loved brother? She clasped the little child (whose face was turned away) more closely to her, and leaning forwards in the pew, she shaded her eyes from the moon and looked steadily and earnestly into the face.

The hands and arms of the figure came forward, stretching towards her in the pew. A voice came from the figure—'Maggie, it is I; and in an instant another voice—the voice of Lucy—screamed, 'Oh, Maggie! that is Jamie! my own brother Jamie!' and the child sprang from Maggie's knee, and was in his arms.

'And why should I have thought anything too hard for God? Why should I not have had faith that he who raised Lazarus would raise my brother too? Neither Martha nor Mary sorrowed more for their brother than I for mine.'

The words did not shape themselves; but this, in all its fulness, was the thought that in a moment of time had passed through Maggie's mind. Then she was also in her brother's arms. For indeed it was he and none other, alive and well.

Meanwhile the music had ceased, because the player had been interrupted by any noise than by reason of that subtle instinct which so often tells us, we know not how, that something wonderful and strange, in which we have an interest and a share, is happening near at hand.

One moment more and Edith and Minnie also were clinging to him, sobbing for joy, and the secret of Minnie's heart was a secret from him no longer.

They all sat down for a while and looked at each other with an exultation strangely mingled with doubt. Joy was so much stronger than curiosity that none of them thought of asking any questions. It was enough that he was restored to them; it mattered not how.

At last he pointed to the new marble above the pew, and said, with a shaking voice—'Oh! what grief it has been to you. We must have that down to-night.'

'It went up only this morning,' said Maggie. 'The vicar has not got the letter this morning,' he asked, 'which was sent to tell you of my coming, and all about it? Indeed I am sure you have not.'

'No,' said Maggie.

'It was enclosed from London by Mr. Franklin.'

'In a blue envelope with a little red seal,' said Lucy; 'and I buried it in the garden, because those letters have always been naughty, and vexed papa.'

In spite of all, what could they do but laugh at the child's explanation? even were it only to make her lift up her head again and be less ashamed of her guilt.

'The letter was to tell you how his sad, sad mistake has arisen, and to say that Mr. Franklin and I were coming down to spend, as we shall find it, the happiest Christmas we have ever known. You were to send and meet us at the Junction, and we were to have been with you two hours ago, if we had not had to walk.'

'And have you seen father?' the girls asked.

'No; he was not in the house. So I have left his old friend there, while I sought you and him. The organ was playing as I came to the church door, and that told me where to find you. But let us make haste home to him.'

Andrew Walter was at home when they arrived, and had heard from the old lawyer the story of his son's return; but had as yet not succeeded in convincing himself that the great joy was real. Not, indeed, until he had the young man in his arms did he fully believe it or dare to say, awe-stricken—

'The sea has given up its dead—given up its dead even to me.'

We will not dwell upon that meeting of father and son, neither of whom had ever known what it was to doubt or mistrust, or waver in his affection for the other. There are some moments of bliss so unalloyed, so great, and so beyond the force of mere language, that only the human heart (which responds alike in high and low, when the great master hand of Nature sweeps the chords) can conceive their perfectness.

To give the necessary facts as briefly as possible, this was how the circumstantial evidence by which the young captain had been declared to be dead, and his ship lost, was shown to be worthless.

his vessel was still in port, he was not long before he sought her out and made acquaintance with her captain. The two vessels sailed afterwards from Cape Town on the same day, Captain Jacobson bound for Calcutta, he himself for Hong Kong. Before parting they had got to like each other, and promised that on getting into port they would write and let each other know what sort of voyage they had.

Walter distinctly remembered writing his own address in pencil inside an envelope which had contained his father's letter received at Cape Town, and giving this to Jacobson. The next he heard of his poor friend was that his vessel and he were lost in the Hooghly. This he learnt from an Indian newspaper somewhere in China, and saw that the captain was supposed to be himself, though how they had got his name he had never known till now. He had instantly written home to allay the fears of his family; but by strange fatality the mail steamer which bore his letter proved to be that very one which struck in the Red Sea, and whose logs were lost. Contrary winds had made his voyage home a long one, and he had arrived in London only the day before. Then when he called on their old friend, Mr. Franklin, he had, to his utter sorrow, learnt that he was still counted amongst the dead, and that these other troubles had fallen on them besides.

Mr. Franklin had advised him not to come home that first night, but to write the first, enclosing under his own envelope the handwriting on which would help to save them from the shock of so sudden a joy. And this was the letter which Miss Lucy had so dexterously buried, and which, by the aid of a lantern and that young lady to point out the grave, they now exhumed.

'Mine,' said Mr. Franklin, 'you need not read; for, as I said, it is only to tell you the mortgage business is all settled in a way beyond all our hopes. The old sinnet, as soon as he knew that the money was ready for him, of course turned round and was particularly anxious not to have it.'

'But as he has given notice,' exclaimed Jamie, 'he shall have it, whether he wants it or not. And let me have one more voyage like this, then we will offer to lend him a little money ourselves, on equally as good security as he has had.'

For Jamie had disposed of his cargo in the China sea to unhoped-for advantage, and had come back freighted, he advent, with wares which he could at once dispose of as profitably in England.

Compared with this resurrection of the dead, and this recovery of lost wealth, other pleasures and surprises of that night were trivial.

But nevertheless when the huge load of luggage arrived which had been brought in a cart from the Junction, the unpacking of the boxes was a sight worth seeing.

Jamie had forgotten nobody. Not to mention the quaint monsters in bronze and ivory, and the pictures from Japan and China which were for no one in particular, there were the beautiful inlaid and carved work-boxes for each of the girls (both at home and at the mill), there was the set of wonderfully-carved chess-men, and the extraordinary pipe for father; there was a cage of brilliant birds, and a dog so small you might almost have called it a microscope, for the Mite; there were endless shawls and silks to adorn the girls, and drive the townsfolk wild with envy—in short, there were so many things rich and rare that the house before half of them were unpacked wore the look of an oriental bazaar.

'Was it,' he almost asked himself, 'was it the solid ground he stood upon, or was it his air?' as he ran with Minnie to her home, having wrapped her well in some of this new finery and loaded her and himself with presents for the widow and the children at the mill.

He could not stay there, nor anywhere. He hardly gave them all time to kiss him before he was off again, declaring he had fifty things to do that night and could not spare a minute to lose for doing them in. But he did not leave before he had made them all understand they had to go to dinner at his father's on the morrow.

Then to the church, first finding Mr. Stone-mason, who took down the lying monument, as he declared, with much greater pleasure than he had put it up. When down the vicar, who had heard the news (as indeed all the town had), begged the stone to keep as a curiosity, and almost dislocated Jamie's arm by way of expressing his own gladness.

The singers were gathered at the church as they came out, for in half an hour they would leave the peal of Christmas Eve.

'Said the vicar—'Now my men, cannot you give us one special peal first for the lost one who is found, and the dead who is alive again?'

'Said the sexton, who was also chief singer—'We are two men short.'

'Said Mr. Botley, the grocer, and Mr. Skinner, the draper, who were standing by—'We'll take a rope apiece; for they were amateur bell-ringers, and could pull with a will, and had forgotten all their fears of half a crown in the pound from Andrew Walter.'

Whereupon he for whom the peal was meant, like the coward he was, not took to his heels and ran home, seeing reason to fear that if he did not do so he might be carried shoulder-high.

The clear voices of the bells overtook him nevertheless before he was half-way home, and made him turn to look back upon the darkling town, blessing it and them. For never since the bells were cast had they sent forth a heartier peal than that they flung upon the air that night; Botley and Skinner having doffed their coats and warmed to their work with mutual emulation.

Mr. Franklin did not make it quite clear to Lucy either that night or next day what had made him so wicked as to write those vexatious letters to papa. But after dinner next day—that is, Christmas Day—when that young lady had almost danced him off his legs—although, for an old gentleman, he did dance quite wonderfully—she so far repented of her past severity towards him as to promise that if he would write often she would neither whip him in person nor whip his proxy, and that under no circumstances would she ever again bury another of his letters, prematurely.

'The organ in the Mormon Temple at Salt Lake City is said to be "8000 voice power."'

Eugénie is just the least bit bald, and covers the "damned spot" with a frizzle and asectle.

Queen Isabella says that if she had not run how nice Paris was she would have abdicated years ago.

A Frenchman has composed another opera of "Romeo and Juliet."